Archæological Newsletter
The Committee for Field Archaeology

Series IV, No. 5, May 2009

Making the Pottery Cross at the Monastery of St. Moses the Abyssinian, Syria.

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The monastery of St. Moses the Abyssinian is in a remarkable location. I first came here while excavating at the lost Crusader castle of Tell al-Asharna in 2002, which is another story. A friend and colleague at the British Museum had suggested that I drop by the monastery and visit his niece, who was staying there. Typically, when I am traveling around during the field season, my objective is to study traditional industry of the region, or fortifications (*e.g.* castles), or museum collections. But unusually this time I visited a series of monasteries, which eventually built into something of a spiritual experience, the culmination of some year's heat-stroke from traveling in the desert! But that is another story! The first of these was St. Moses. The journey itself was largely unremarkable, just take the main Damascus to Aleppo road about 90 km north of Damascus, then at the small town of al-Nabk, head east. I passed the city garbage-dump, a cement works, then carried along the plateau that is the Qalamoun Mountains. Then suddenly, the car turned a corner, and we were at the edge of a rocky escarpment, looking east across the endless desert of Syria **(Fig.1)**. The effect was immediate and profound; going suddenly from the mundane world to a view so far and wide that it opened the mind as wide as the vista. Merely the view itself was a spiritual experience. I thought to myself, "If I were to build a monastery, it would be right here." Actually, the monastery was indeed on that escarpment, but in a more secluded valley a few kilometres north of that point!

Figure 1: Br. Jens of the community and myself doing field reconnaissance in 2006, looking east (photo by Francesca Scorsone).

When I got to the monastery I found that my colleague's niece, Dr. Emma Loosley, was actually a Byzantine architectural historian, and he had failed to tell me that she had been trying, on the community's behalf, to find someone to study the mediaeval pottery, and undertake an archaeological survey of the region! I had walked

right into it! The rest is, as they say, history, or actually in my case archaeology.

The Monastery

As described in the last *ANL*, the monastery was founded in the Byzantine period, perhaps as early as the late 4th century but possibly with Roman foundations. It had an illustrious history, with a remarkable group of mural paintings c.1200 CE, and was then abandoned in the 19th century. Canadian, Erika Dodd, studied it for a University of Toronto PhD thesis on the mural paintings. Some of Dodd's earlier papers were read by young Jesuit priest, Paolo Dall'Oglio, who was working on a doctorate in Islamic studies at the Gregorian University in Rome. Stories have it that as he wandered alone in the desert near the monastery he fell off a cliff and almost died, but was rescued by a local Muslim. He took this as a sign from God that he should return to the monastery and restore it, which he did. It is now a thriving community again, with an important role to play in interfaith dialogue, the greening of the desert, and ecological preservation. Fr. Paolo told me that it was a sign from God that another Canadian (following Dodd) would come and do the archaeological study. He is a very convincing man!

The Pottery

But what actually interested me at first was the pottery. During the restoration of the site a very large group of pottery fragments was found, some of which were almost restorable (which makes them complete by archaeological standards!). They are all of the mid-14th century, and were a type with a fired-clay body, and a lead-fluxed glaze, some of them with white clay slip-paint (Slip-painted wares) **(Fig.2)**, others with an overall white slip, which was then excised to create a design (Slip-excised wares). The glazed ceramics of the mediaeval Middle East are a particular study of mine (Mason 2004). From research I had done earlier, I knew the pottery was from about the mid-14th century. I used petrographic analysis **(Fig.3)**, which looks at the rocks and minerals in the ceramic body to characterize centres of production, and decided the pottery was most likely made in Damascus.

Figure 2: Mid-14th century pottery found at the monastery: Slip-painted ware.

It appeared to me that this group probably indicated the initial abandonment of the monastery. Typically in archaeological contexts when you find pottery all over the floor, it means someone has moved out, it does not actually represent the pottery used in a dwelling when it was occupied. Look around your home now, how much broken pottery is on the floor right now? Probably none. Housekeeping has not improved so much since mediaeval or ancient times! Broken pots are thrown away, not left on the floor. If you find pottery on the floor, that means the place was abandoned, or destroyed suddenly. At the monastery of St. Moses it appeared that discarded pottery and

other refuse was thrown over the edge of the building into the deep *wadi* next to it, and thereby lost to the archaeological record.

Figure 3: Photomicrograph of a Slip-incised ware bowl, showing a ceramic body probably made in Damascus. The bright band is the slip, made of crushed quartz.

Pottery is probably the most important type of archaeological artifact since it first appeared which, in the Middle East, was in the Neolithic period. Unlike other materials, pottery never rusts, it is never melted down and recycled, and it never rots or decays, so hypothetically every piece of pottery ever made is available to study. Hence it is typically the most common artifact, and sometimes it is the only artifact on archaeological sites, and archaeologists rely on pottery to say who lived at the site and when. Groups of pottery like this are very important in studying ancient pottery, as it helps to define a 'sequence' of ceramics, which is what we use to date the sites. So in 2004, I went back to the monastery to study the pottery. I also agreed to undertake an archaeological survey of the region, and also find the funds to build a museum at the site, but that is another story!

One of the ways archaeologists study pottery is to draw it. We draw the 'profile' of the vessel which records the form, and the design. By

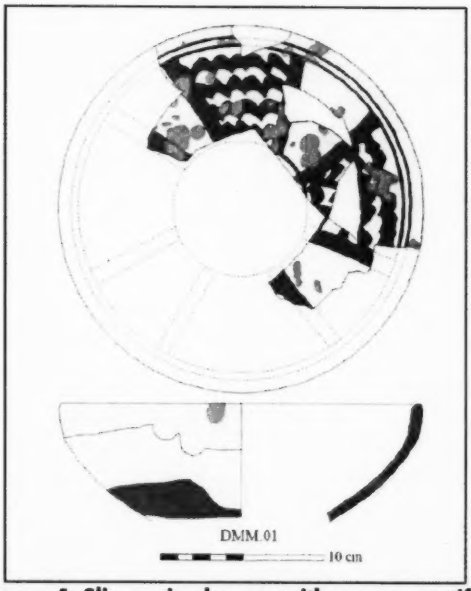

Figure 4: Slip-excised ware with a cross motif!

doing this I can say that the forms are derived from imports of Chinese ceramics, which I know from my earlier research becomes predominant in the 14th century. The designs on the Slip-painted wares are also derived from those of the Chinese imports. The Slip-excised wares looked typical at first, with designs superficially identical to those found elsewhere in the Islamic world, almost certainly being made by Muslims. But as I drew one of these vessels, I noticed something very odd. What I thought was at first a typical radial design, proved to only have four limbs **(Fig.4)**. It was a cross!

There are many patterns and designs found on Islamic pottery, but something that could be confused with a cross is practically non-existent. In fact, the only other cross-like patterns I could find were in Egyptian Lustre-ware pottery of the 11th century, which had a number of designs derived from Coptic Christian art, and in the first Lustre-wares made in Syria which continued these motifs up to about 1125 CE. Once I

noticed this oddity, I noticed a number of other possible crosses, and some other unusual designs, including stars and flowers **(Fig.5)**.

Figure 5: Slip-excised ware with star motif.

The entire suite of designs in this group looked very odd, and I found a possible influence in rondel motifs in Christian art in Syria. These are round designs, most distinctly Christian when they have a cross in them, but including all of the other peculiar motifs mentioned above, like stars and flowers. It seemed the entire suite of ceramic from the monastery had Christian motifs on them, although they would have been made by a Muslim potter in Damascus. A further finding from my architectural study (see last *ANL*) is that the monastery did NOT have a major abandonment phase in the 14th century, it was simply that there was an incredibly large amount of 14th century pottery at the site.

New Dishes from Damascus?

In the church, on the wall paintings, are a number of inscriptions, and one day at the monastery while reading Erica Dodd's book, I found that one of them was dated to 1343. It recorded that "There came to this blessed monastery Marcos, Bishop of Jerusalem and Homs and Damascus the Protected of the Syrian Jacobites." At first the date struck me, and then I thought about this person. He would have been the supreme authority of the Syrian Orthodox Church, which then ran the monastery. It is now Syrian Catholic, and I asked the present superior, Fr. Paolo, what this would mean today. "It would be as though the Pope came," he said. I thought for a while, then said "If the Pope came, would you send someone down to Damascus for new pottery?" He agreed that he would; a lot of nice new pottery for the Pope to eat from. Is it possible that this is what happened in 1343? Did the arrival of the head of the Church excite so much pottery buying, that they made a special order of Christian-influenced pots in Damascus, in such numbers that they overwhelmed the ceramic corpus of the site? Well, it IS a hypothesis!

Acknowledgements

Research on this project was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I'd also like to thank Dr. Michel Maqdisi of the Directorate of Antiquities and Museums of Syria for his support; and also all the community at the monastery of St. Moses.

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The *Archaeological Newsletter* is made possible through the generosity of an anonymous donor.